ANDREW LANG

THE LIBRARY

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CHAPTER I.
AN APOLOGY FOR THE BOOK-HUNTER

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“ALL men,” says Dr. Dibdin, “like to be their own librarians.” A writer on the library has no business to lay down the law as to the books that even the most inexperienced amateurs should try to collect. There are books which no lover of literature can afford to be without; classics, ancient and modern, on which the world has pronounced its verdict. These works, in whatever shape we may be able to possess them, are the necessary foundations of even the smallest collections. Homer, Dante and Milton Shakespeare and Sophocles, Aristophanes and Molière, Thucydides, Tacitus, and Gibbon, Swift and Scott,—these every lover of letters will desire to possess in the original languages or in translations. The list of such classics is short indeed, and when we go beyond it, the tastes of men begin to differ very widely. An assortment of broadsheet ballads and scrap-books, bought in boyhood, was the nucleus of Scott’s library, rich in the works of poets and magicians, of alchemists, and anecdotists. A childish liking for coloured prints of stage characters, may be the germ of a theatrical collection like those of Douce, and Malone, and Cousin. People who are studying any past period of human history, or any old phase or expression of human genius, will eagerly collect little contemporary volumes which seem trash to other amateurs. For example, to a student of Molière, it is a happy chance to come across “La Carte du Royaume des Prétieuses”—(The map of the

kingdom of the “Précieuses”)—written the year before the comedian brought out his famous play “Les Précieuses Ridicules.” This geographical tract appeared in the very “Recueil des Pieces Choisies,” whose authors Magdelon, in the play, was expecting to entertain, when Mascarille made his appearance. There is a faculty which Horace Walpole named “serendipity,”—the luck of falling on just the literary document which one wants at the moment. All collectors of out of the way books know the pleasure of the exercise of serendipity, but they enjoy it in different ways. One man will go home hugging a volume of sermons, another with a bulky collection of catalogues, which would have distended the pockets even of the wide great-coat made for the purpose, that Charles Nodier used to wear when he went a book-hunting. Others are captivated by black letter, others by the plays of such obscurities as Nabbes and Glapthorne. But however various the tastes of collectors of books, they are all agreed on one point,—the love of printed paper. Even an Elzevir man can sympathise with Charles Lamb’s attachment to “that folio Beaumont and Fletcher which he dragged home late at night from Barker’s in Covent Garden.” But it is another thing when Lamb says, “I do not care for a first folio of Shakespeare.” A bibliophile who could say this could say anything.

No, there are, in every period of taste, books which, apart from their literary value, all collectors admit to possess, if not for themselves, then for others of the brotherhood, a peculiar preciousness. These books are esteemed for curiosity, for beauty of type, paper, binding, and illustrations, for some connection they may have with

famous people of the past, or for their rarity. It is about these books, the method of preserving them, their enemies, the places in which to hunt for them, that the following pages are to treat. It is a subject more closely connected with the taste for curiosities than with art, strictly so called. We are to be occupied, not so much with literature as with books, not so much with criticism as with bibliography, the quaint *duenna* of literature, a study apparently dry, but not without its humours. And here an apology must be made for the frequent allusions and anecdotes derived from French writers. These are as unavoidable, almost, as the use of French terms of the sport in tennis and in fencing. In bibliography, in the care for books *as* books, the French are still the teachers of Europe, as they were in tennis and are in fencing. Thus, Richard de Bury, Chancellor of Edward III., writes in his “Philobiblon:” “Oh God of Gods in Zion! what a rushing river of joy gladdens my heart as often as I have a chance of going to Paris! There the days seem always short; there are the goodly collections on the delicate fragrant book-shelves.” Since Dante wrote of—

“L’onor di quell’ arte
Ch’ allumare è chiamata in Parisi,”

“the art that is called illuminating in Paris,” and all the other arts of writing, printing, binding books, have been most skilfully practised by France. She improved on the lessons given by Germany and Italy in these crafts. Twenty books about books are written in Paris for one that is published in England. In our country Dibdin is out of date (the second edition of his “Bibliomania” was published in

1811), and Mr. Hill Burton’s humorous “Book-hunter” is out of print. Meanwhile, in France, writers grave and gay, from the gigantic industry of Brunet to Nodier’s quaint fancy, and Janin’s wit, and the always entertaining bibliophile Jacob (Paul Lacroix), have written, or are writing, on books, manuscripts, engravings, editions, and bindings. In England, therefore, rare French books are eagerly sought, and may be found in all the booksellers’ catalogues. On the continent there is no such care for our curious or beautiful editions, old or new. Here a hint may be given to the collector. If he “picks up” a rare French book, at a low price, he would act prudently in having it bound in France by a good craftsman. Its value, when “the wicked day of destiny” comes, and the collection is broken up, will thus be made secure. For the French do not suffer our English bindings gladly; while we have no narrow prejudice against the works of Lortic and Capé, but the reverse. For these reasons then, and also because every writer is obliged to make the closest acquaintance with books in the direction where his own studies lie, the writings of French authorities are frequently cited in the following pages.

This apology must be followed by a brief defence of the taste and passion of book-collecting, and of the class of men known invidiously as book-worms and book-hunters. They and their simple pleasures are the butts of a cheap and shrewish set of critics, who cannot endure in others a taste which is absent in themselves. Important new books have actually been condemned of late years because they were printed on good paper, and a valuable historical treatise was attacked by reviewers quite angrily because its outward

array was not mean and forbidding. Of course, critics who take this view of new books have no patience with persons who care for “margins,” and “condition,” and early copies of old books. We cannot hope to convert the adversary, but it is not necessary to be disturbed by his clamour. People are happier for the possession of a taste as long as they possess it, and it does not, like the demons of Scripture, possess them. The wise collector gets instruction and pleasure from his pursuit, and it may well be that, in the long run, he and his family do not lose money. The amusement may chance to prove a very fair investment.

As to this question of making money by collecting, Mr. Hill Burton speaks very distinctly in “The Book-hunter:” “Where money is the object let a man speculate or become a miser. . . Let not the collector ever, unless in some urgent and necessary circumstances, part with any of his treasures. Let him not even have recourse to that practice called barter, which political philosophers tell us is the universal resource of mankind preparatory to the invention of money. Let him confine all his transactions in the market to purchasing only. No good comes of gentlemen-amateurs buying and selling.” There is room for difference of opinion here, but there seems to be most reason on the side of Mr. Hill Burton. It is one thing for the collector to be able to reflect that the money he expends on books is not lost, and that his family may find themselves richer, not poorer, because he indulged his taste. It is quite another thing to buy books as a speculator buys shares, meaning to sell again at a profit as soon as occasion offers. It is necessary also to warn the beginner against indulging extravagant

hopes. He must buy experience with his books, and many of his first purchases are likely to disappoint him. He will pay dearly for the wrong “Cæsar” of 1635, the one *without* errors in pagination; and this is only a common example of the beginner’s blunders. Collecting is like other forms of sport; the aim is not certain at first, the amateur is nervous, and, as in angling, is apt to “strike” (a bargain) too hurriedly.

I often think that the pleasure of collecting is like that of sport. People talk of “book-hunting,” and the old Latin motto says that “one never wearies of the chase in this forest.” But the analogy to angling seems even stronger. A collector walks in the London or Paris streets, as he does by Tweed or Spey. Many a lordly mart of books he passes, like Mr. Quaritch’s, Mr. Toovey’s, or M. Fontaine’s, or the shining store of M.M. Morgand et Fatout, in the Passage des Panoramas. Here I always feel like Brassicanus in the king of Hungary’s collection, “non in Bibliotheca, sed in gremio Jovis;” “not in a library, but in paradise.” It is not given to every one to cast angle in these preserves. They are kept for dukes and millionaires. Surely the old Duke of Roxburghe was the happiest of mortals, for to him both the chief bookshops and auction rooms, and the famous salmon streams of Floors, were equally open, and he revelled in the prime of book-collecting and of angling. But there are little tributary streets, with humbler stalls, shy pools, as it were, where the humbler fisher of books may hope to raise an Elzevir, or an old French play, a first edition of Shelley, or a Restoration comedy. It is usually a case of hope unfulfilled; but the merest nibble of a rare book, say Marston’s poems in the original edition, or Beddoes’s “Love’s Arrow

Poisoned," or Bankes's "Bay Horse in a Trance," or the "Mel Heliconicum" of Alexander Ross, or "Les Oeuvres de Clement Marot, de Cahors, Vallet de Chambre du Roy, A Paris, Ches Pierre Gaultier, 1551;" even a chance at something of this sort will kindle the waning excitement, and add a pleasure to a man's walk in muddy London. Then, suppose you purchase for a couple of shillings the "Histoire des Amours de Henry IV, et autres pieces curieuses, A Leyde, Chez Jean Sambyx (Elzevir), 1664," it is certainly not unpleasant, on consulting M. Fontaine's catalogue, to find that he offers the same work at the ransom of £10. The beginner thinks himself in singular luck, even though he has no idea of vending his collection, and he never reflects that *condition*—spotless white leaves and broad margins, make the market value of a book.

Setting aside such bare considerations of profit, the sport given by bookstalls is full of variety and charm. In London it may be pursued in most of the cross streets that stretch a dirty net between the British Museum and the Strand. There are other more shy and less frequently poached resorts which the amateur may be allowed to find out for himself. In Paris there is the long sweep of the *Quais*, where some eighty *bouquinistes* set their boxes on the walls of the embankment of the Seine. There are few country towns so small but that books, occasionally rare and valuable, may be found lurking in second-hand furniture warehouses. This is one of the advantages of living in an old country. The Colonies are not the home for a collector. I have seen an Australian bibliophile enraptured by the rare chance of buying, in Melbourne, an early work on—the history of Port

Jackson! This seems but poor game. But in Europe an amateur has always occupation for his odd moments in town, and is for ever lured on by the radiant apparition of Hope. All collectors tell their anecdotes of wonderful luck, and magnificent discoveries. There is a volume “Voyages Littéraires sur les Quais de Paris” (Paris, Durand, 1857), by M. de Fontaine de Resbecq, which might convert the dullest soul to book-hunting. M. de Resbecq and his friends had the most amazing good fortune. A M. N— found six original plays of Molière (worth perhaps as many hundreds of pounds), bound up with Garth’s “Dispensary,” an English poem which has long lost its vogue. It is worth while, indeed, to examine all volumes marked “Miscellanea,” “Essays,” and the like, and treasures may possibly lurk, as Snuffy Davy knew, within the battered sheepskin of school books. Books lie in out of the way places. Poggio rescued “Quintilian” from the counter of a wood merchant. The best time for book-hunting in Paris is the early morning. “The take,” as anglers say, is “on” from half-past seven to half-past nine a.m. At these hours the vendors exhibit their fresh wares, and the agents of the more wealthy booksellers come and pick up everything worth having. These agents quite spoil the sport of the amateur. They keep a strict watch on every country dealer’s catalogue, snap up all he has worth selling, and sell it over again, charging pounds in place of shillings. But M. de Resbecq vows that he once picked up a copy of the first edition of La Rochefoucauld’s “Maxims” out of a box which two booksellers had just searched. The same collector got together very promptly all the original editions of La Bruyère, and he even found a

copy of the Elzevir “Pastissier Français,” at the humble price of six sous. Now the “ Pastissier Français,” an ill-printed little cookery-book of the Elzevirs, has lately fetched £600 at a sale. The Antiquary’s story of Snuffy Davy and the “Game of Chess,” is dwarfed by the luck of M. de Resbecq. Not one amateur in a thousand can expect such good fortune. There is, however, a recent instance of a Rugby boy, who picked up, on a stall, a few fluttering leaves hanging together on a flimsy thread. The old woman who kept the stall could hardly be induced to accept the large sum of a shilling for an original quarto of Shakespeare’s “King John.” These stories are told that none may despair. That none may be over confident, an author may recount his own experience. The only odd *trouvaille* that ever fell to me was a clean copy of “La Journée Chrétienne,” with the name of Léon Gambetta, 1844, on its catholic fly-leaf. Rare books grow rarer every day, and often ’tis only Hope that remains at the bottom of the fourpenny boxes. Yet the Paris book-hunters cleave to the game. August is their favourite season; for in August there is least competition. Very few people are, as a rule, in Paris, and these are not tempted to loiter. The bookseller is drowsy, and glad not to have the trouble of chaffering. The English go past, and do not tarry beside a row of dusty boxes of books. The heat threatens the amateur with sunstroke. Then, says M. Octave Uzanne, in a prose *ballade* of book-hunters—then, calm, glad, heroic, the *bouquineurs* prowl forth, refreshed with hope. The brown old calf-skin wrinkles in the sun, the leaves crackle, you could poach an egg on the cover of a quarto. The dome of the Institute glitters, the sickly trees seem to wither, their

leaves wax red and grey, a faint warm wind is walking the streets. Under his vast umbrella the book-hunter is secure and content; he enjoys the pleasures of the sport unvexed by poachers, and thinks less of the heat than does the deer-stalker on the bare hill-side.

There is plenty of morality, if there are few rare books in the stalls. The decay of affection, the breaking of friendship, the decline of ambition, are all illustrated in these fourpenny collections. The presentation volumes are here which the author gave in the pride of his heart to the poet who was his “Master,” to the critic whom he feared, to the friend with whom he was on terms of mutual admiration. The critic has not even cut the leaves, the poet has brusquely torn three or four apart with his finger and thumb, the friend has grown cold, and has let the poems slip into some corner of his library, whence they were removed on some day of doom and of general clearing out. The sale of the library of a late learned prelate who had Boileau’s hatred of a dull book was a scene to be avoided by his literary friends. The Bishop always gave the works which were offered to him a fair chance. He read till he could read no longer, cutting the pages as he went, and thus his progress could be traced like that of a backwoodsman who “blazes” his way through a primeval forest. The paper-knife generally ceased to do duty before the thirtieth page. The melancholy of the book-hunter is aroused by two questions, “Whence?” and “Whither?” The bibliophile asks about his books the question which the metaphysician asks about his soul. Whence came they? Their value depends a good deal on the answer. If they are stamped with arms, then there is a book